

1985 by 50artists

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Summary:

It's 1985. Eddie Kaspbrak wears Gucci loafers and spends his time driving celebrities around New York. Richie Tozier owns over a thousand records and does Voices on the radio. Take On Me is the year's biggest hit single. Somewhere in Maine, a supernatural child-eating clown is defeated, but neither Richie nor Eddie have anything to do with *that*.

Or: Adrian Mellon kills a clown. Mike never calls. The Losers find each other anyway.

1. Prologue

In a different story, Adrian Mellon killed a clown.

He thought he would be scarred for life, afterwards. Not just in the literal sense (the teeth that missed their mark, leaving a patch of thin gouges still raw under his armpit) - but surely no one can go through that, see the things Adrian saw, and come out the other side unscathed. The following night, neither him nor Don slept a wink.

"We've got to leave this town," Adrian said into the dead of night. His projected date of 'eight more months' for writing now seemed absurd.

Don nodded. "You're right," he said. Adrian loved him for that; no 'I told you so', no lecture on how Don was a local and he'd recognised the evil in Derry better than Adrian or the policemen or maybe anyone else. Don had known all along. If only Adrian had listened.

They left the town early the next morning and drove to NYC. They didn't have a place to stay, so they rented a hotel room for the night.

Life moved on.

Slowly (but still far quicker than should have been natural), Adrian's nightmares faded into nothing, and Don became comfortable enough to hold hands in public again, started to wear eye make-up on nights out. Adrian scored a job writing for a newspaper.

They did not forget immediately. It was more of a fading. Before long, if asked where Don was from, or how long the two of them had been together or where they met, they would simply mention Maine and then change the subject. Don stopped wondering what had happened to his old friends. Taxidermied birds no longer bought the Falcon to mind. Adrian thought the stretch marks beneath his armpit were a strange shape, but Don assured him that he didn't find them off-putting. Adrian's unfinished college manuscript languished forever in the bottom of a shoebox, but he started a new book, and actually finished this one, and even got it published.

For some reason, they both developed a fear of clowns. But it was

fine. They avoided slasher movies and kid's TV and McDonald's restaurants with those plastic Ronald McDonald statues. They muddled onwards.

Life wasn't perfect - but it was good.

2. Chapter 1

If Eddie had to hear that God-awful Lionel Richie song on the radio one more time, he was going to drive his car into the side of a building and kill himself. Or even better, he'd drive off a bridge and drown both himself and the dickhead currently in the backseat. Apparently, Seb Stevens was a celebrity. Eddie Kaspbrak had certainly never heard of him, and he resented having to play this Christian radio station that did nothing but loop between the same three inoffensive pop songs for hour after hour after hour. "Say you, say me," Lionel Richie was crooning, "that's the way it should be," and Eddie didn't *hate* the track, it was fine, alright, maybe not his taste but he wasn't picky when it came to music - but there were limits to how many times a man could hear the title song of a mediocre movie without going insane, and Eddie was about to hit that limit.

The December weather had turned the roads into slick deathtraps. It snowed a few days ago, just enough to make the whole city look brown and miserable. The streetlights and headlights fell in sporadic waves over Seb Steven's face; he was leant between the front seats, car phone pressed up against his chin. The cord was only long enough for the driver's use so Stevens had to breathe almost down Eddie's neck, and he was talking far too loud. God's sake, Eddie thought, do we need the radio while you talk on the phone? Do we need another dose of Lionel Richie? Do we really?

Of course Eddie didn't complain. People did not hire professional drivers for their opinions, they hired them to shut up and drive. If Seb Stevens wanted an authentic NYC cabbie experience, he'd be in a cab.

"Send him up," Stevens was braying into the phone. His breath smelled sour, of coffee and whiskey, and Eddie made a concentrated effort not to lean away. "What's he do, impressions? Voices, whaddya mean voices? That's impressions, right?" On the other end of the line someone responded, but Eddie couldn't hear over the radio. Stevens laughed. "Yeah, whatever. Ain't heard that one before." Finally, the Lionel Richie song finished. Eddie surreptitiously turned the radio

down while Stevens was distracted; he was turning the cord around his finger, twisting it like a teenage girl in a highschool movie, and he was grinning. "What's this guy's name, again? Richie, right, right. Sure. Sounds a bit like Richard Lewis, don't'cha think? Reckon we could convince him to change it? Aw, we'll figure it out later, try him out first. Yeah. Yeah, see you in a few days, right? Bye."

He slammed the phone gracelessly back into its cradle. Eddie didn't know how his customers dared touch the thing; it was only a few steps above a payphone, crawling with every bug under the sun, and even though he sterilized it along with the rest of the car Eddie refused to use it on principle. In fact, just thinking about it was making him nervous. Eddie turned his focus back onto the road.

Something about the combination of the name Richie, and the idea that this man did impressions - sorry, he did *Voices* - had struck Eddie with an intense feeling of déjà-vu. Seb Stevens was now sprawled out on the back seats. Although Stevens generally preferred not to speak on his drives, he wasn't like some of Eddie's clientele, who were snobby enough to actually ignore him; so he pushed a little bit of professionalism aside and said, "I guess that was someone's agent on the phone?"

Stevens looked up. It was clear from the expression on his face that he had allowed Eddie to blend into the furniture, like the fancy seat covers and the air-conditioning and the radio, and was now surprised to hear him speaking. "Oh," he said, "yeah, some wannabe from LA, yannow?"

Eddie, who did not know anything about wannabes or LA, nodded.

"Handy, ain't they, these car phones? Never had one before. Hey," Stevens frowned, his round face screwing up on itself, "turn the music back up, would you?"

The New York night was a hazy blur above him when Eddie looked skyward for strength. He turned the radio up.

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Myra hated it when he was late home; even when he planned it out

in advance, and ran through the schedule with her. She waited up, worried, and sometimes when Eddie pulled into the driveway he would be able to see the guilty twitch of their bedroom curtain. It was nice to know someone was watching over him. But on nights like this, when he felt stiff and grimy beneath his collar, and he'd been out driving so long that he'd become acclimatised to the roads beneath him (traffic-laden NYC roads, but roads nonetheless) and walking with his own two feet seemed counter-intuitive, and he just wanted to go the fuck to sleep - on nights like this, Myra got under his skin.

He tried to be quiet as he unlocked the door and slipped up the stairs and into their bathroom. A shower would definitely wake Myra, on the off chance that she'd fallen asleep; the boiler had been 'fixed' countless times but still made a clattering, whirring noise. Instead he satisfied himself with removing his shirt and splashing cold water over his face. When he looked up in the mirror, rivulets of tap water dribbling down his face, he found himself oddly fascinated by his own features. Eddie Kaspbrak was not an ugly man, although he was not handsome either - normally he paid no attention to his looks at all, other than to assure that he was professional and smart. That night he was struck by his eyes and his nose and his mouth and ears and lips and forehead as though he'd never seen any of it before. *I have changed a lot since I was eleven*, he thought - and the thought was odd, because everyone changes between the ages of eleven and forty. Still he was fascinated by his face. He tried to pick out the young boy's features that had once sat in the place of his middle aged ones, and found that he could do it, more or less. As if a little code to the past was printed in him.

Eddie shook his head, dried his face, and moved into the bedroom.

Just as predicted, Myra was sat up in bed, and she was reading a magazine with the cover page folded so that Eddie could not read it. When she saw him, her face softened. "How was work?" she asked, and Eddie felt like an awful husband for wanting to sneak around her, but he also felt headachey and sore and tired.

"Fine," he said, and fetched himself a set of pyjamas, the comfortable ones with white and blue stripes that made him look like a cartoon character. "How was your day?"

“I missed you, Eddie.”

That filled him with irritation; she had only seen him a few hours ago, for God’s sake! But then he recognised the emotion as baseless, and just gave her a tired smile, exaggerated the weariness of his motions as he buttoned up his pyjama shirt in the hope that she’d take pity on him and not make further conversation. Then he went through to the bathroom to take his pills and brush his teeth, and of course she followed, hovering in the door, watching him. Always watching him. It was like a ritual; neither of them spoke as he went through the meticulous motions of brushing his teeth. Eddie had one of those electric toothbrushes that vibrated and (supposedly) reduced the risk of gum disease and plaque.

Together, they walked back to bed, and slipped under the sheets. Myra pulled Eddie towards her. He let his eyes blink shut.

Myra told Eddie that he had nightmares - that sometimes he would moan and even shout in his sleep, rip the sheets off his body and kick Myra away. Eddie never remembered any of his dreams. Still, he knew in his gut as he laid in bed, he had been disturbed today; something had been stirred up, and even if *Eddie* didn’t know what, his subconscious did, and he would be punished in his dreams. He allowed his hand to curl around the soft material of Myra’s nightdress. He tried to drift off to sleep.

3. Chapter 2

He'd been driving Stevens for two weeks and the man still hadn't learnt to stick to a fucking schedule. Eddie was sat in his car, bored, waiting outside JFK airport with a paperback that wasn't as good as the blurb suggested it should be. The weather was bleak. Stevens was almost an hour late by the time he turned up - coat pulled into a tent over his head, the LA wannabe (Richie Tozier, of course) trailing by his side - and Eddie felt so irritated, he was tempted to keep the doors locked. Of course, he did not. He'd been in a bad mood ever since he'd heard the name *Richie Tozier* and he still couldn't quite fathom why, but it was enough to put him on edge, and he just wanted this day to be over as quickly as possible. When he stopped by the office that morning, he'd been tempted to send one of the boys in his place. Let someone else deal with Tozier. But Eddie was also driven by a perverse sense of *wanting* to know why he'd spent the last few nights sweaty and anxious and unable to sleep. He wanted to know what was itching at his brain. Myra had fussed over him all morning, insisting that he had a fever and that he needed to take the day off work, but Eddie had stood his ground. So now he sat in his car, black suit and shiny shoes, pretending not feel anxious as Stevens pried the trunk open and threw in Tozier's suitcases.

"Right," Stevens said in that booming voice of his, "you ready for New York, Tozier?" In his accent it sounded like *New Yo-i-ke*, the vowels stretched out into syllables of their own.

"Sure, you bet'cha," said the other man.

Eddie had been expecting someone young; in fact, he realised he had been expecting an 11-year-old or maybe 12-year-old kid, which was so bizarre it left him momentarily wrong-footed. The man was an adult, of course. Probably the same age as Eddie. He bundled into the back seat in a great big winter coat that swamped his figure, and shook out his hair as though the two minute walk from the airport door to the car had frozen him solid. "Cor, dat's a chill an' a *half*," he said in what sounded like an impression, although Eddie wasn't sure what it was supposed to be an impression of. He had what Eddie would charitably describe as a face suited to radio - he wasn't ugly,

but he'd never make it as a movie star either, except maybe a put-upon sidekick in a comedy. Eddie felt a bit of sympathy for that. No doubt the guy would be sent packing in a few days. There weren't many generalisations you could make about celebrities - Eddie had driven for people who were rude and people who were embarrassingly polite, he'd driven for party animals and porn stars and prudes, he'd driven for men who didn't think twice about snorting cocaine off the backseat and he'd driven for men who apologised for every cigarette they smoked. There was one only one constant; the people who made it big were all either beautiful or filthy rich. They weren't like Richie Tozier, middle aged with shaggy hair and great big buck teeth and coke-bottle glasses.

Wait. This guy didn't have glasses.

Eddie blinked. Tried to focus himself. Luckily for him, the conversation between the two men in the back didn't require any input from their driver. "You'll be at the audition tomorrow noon," Seb Stevens was saying, as Eddie pulled out of his parking spot and began to drive, "gotta impress them, yeah?"

Richie looked unconvinced. "I'll impress them. I'll definitely impress them."

"Ha!" Eddie said. "Good luck with that, idiot."

Oh God.

Eddie didn't know why. He didn't know how. But something about Tozier's see-through confidence, that *I'll impress them* said with such false cheer (but how could Eddie see through his cheer, false or not? How could Eddie possibly claim to understand the emotions of a man he'd never met?) went straight to his head and made him feel like a kid ribbing his friends, or something. The words had been out of his mouth before he could stop them. This was a nightmare.

Before he could apologise, Richie was already replying. "You don't know anything about showbiz, you fucking square piece-of-shit," he said, but he wasn't pissed off so much as jovial, matching Eddie's playful tone, "so shut your mouth."

Both of them stared at each other.

“Uh,” Seb Stevens said, “what, have you two already met, or somethin’?”

Richie shook his head. “We haven’t.” He spoke slowly, as though he was thinking, and stared at Eddie in the rear-view mirror. Without glasses, his eyes seemed too small, not quite buggy and manic enough.

Eddie didn’t say anything. He knew that his face must be flushed because it felt as though every capillary in his cheeks was bursting all at once. He tried to turn his concentration to driving. What had possessed him? Why, in a million years, would he ever speak to a client like that? *I must not have been in my right mind*, he thought to himself, *did I take the wrong pills this morning? Did I accidentally overdose on something? My God, am I going to die? Myra was right. I should’ve stayed at home.* Luckily, Eddie was struck by the fear of death so often that he had learnt to power through it. Breathing deeply, he began to drive. He made an extra effort not to listen to the conversation in the back seats at all. Instead he turned his focus to the Christian radio, which was as boring as ever but at least it was a distraction, and *Take on Me* was a surprisingly catchy song. He had an aspirator in the glove compartment in case he needed it. He was starting to feel as though he might need it. Soon.

And yet. Eddie couldn’t quite keep his eyes off the rear-view mirror, no matter how hard he tried. As he drove through the grey Queens streets, he learnt two things about Richie Tozier:

Firstly, he was completely unable to sit still. Even a second of inactivity was beyond him; he hummed, he bounced his leg, he danced (or at least wiggled his shoulders) to the radio and he interjected when there was no need for him to speak, he twitched and he grinned and he stared out of the window.

Secondly, Richie Tozier was *still* staring back at Eddie Kaspbrak.

It wasn’t straight staring; he’d look away for a few seconds, then look back, then fidget for a while, maybe meet Eddie’s eye before he glanced away once more. Eddie tried to focus on the road. Whatever

conversation Richie and Stevens had been involved in petered off, and Stevens leant back, lit a cigar and filled the whole car almost instantly with smoke. Eddie's hands felt sweaty around the wheel. They weren't going far. If he just stuck with this a few more minutes, Stevens and Tozier would be gone, and he could relax, at least for the next couple of hours.

"So," Richie said after a few second's silence, "sooo, what's your name, mister driver?" It wasn't unusual for people to make conversation with him, especially people who weren't used to tuning out his presence. Eddie flashed him a professional smile.

"Edward Kaspbrak."

"That's formal, man, can I call you Eddie?"

Eddie shrugged. "I guess."

"What about Eds?"

"No "

"Aw, come *on* ."

It happened again; almost without thinking Eddie slipped into the argument and professionalism went out the window. "Shut up, dickhead, I said no. Can't you take no for an answer?"

"Not from you, Eddie baby."

"That might actually be *worse* -"

"Eddie baby. Eddie, my love." That seemed to trigger some link in Richie's brain, and he started singing in a mock-50s warble (it was a surprisingly good impression, truth be told), "*Eddie, my love, I love you so, how I've waited for you, you'll never know..* ."

"You're a nightmare," Eddie replied, "and you can't sing for shit," but they were both grinning.

"You love me really," Richie insisted, and then he reached through the back of the seat to ruffle Eddie's hair (or at least, what was left of

it), "don't you, Eddie, you cutie?"

"Dude, I'm fucking driving!"

Then Richie poked him in an especially ticklish spot. Eddie flinched, the car swerved. He quickly righted himself, apart from he over-compensated and almost mounted the pavement on the right side of the road. The cigar fell out of Steven's mouth and he scrambled around for it on the floor of the car. "Shit!" Eddie shouted, "fucking hell, Rich!"

"How was I supposed to know you'd shit yourself? I mean," and then Eddie could see him gearing up to do a Voice, "*yew don't just -*"

"Richard fucking Tozier," Eddie said, "I do not want to hear one of your fucking Voices when you just made me crash the car -"

"Oh my God, you swerved, like, an inch over the line, who even cares."

"Do you know the fucking statistics on -"

Seb Stevens cleared his throat.

Eddie's eyes snapped guiltily back to the road, and he realised he'd driven almost two blocks past Steven's usual drop-off point. "Shit," he said, then caught himself. "Uh, I'll turn around, Mr Stevens."

"Just let us out here."

"But -"

"I don't need another goddamn moment in this car," Stevens said, and Eddie had a sinking feeling that he'd just lost a client. He stopped the car in silence. The two men got out. Even as him and Stevens walked away, Richie kept turning and looking back to where Eddie was parked. Eddie knew this because he kept turning to look at Richie, too. Every part of his body felt either too hot or too cold.

The second Richie was out of sight, Eddie fumbled in his glove compartment for his aspirator. He tried to convince himself that the medicated tang of it was helpful going down his throat. He wasn't

sure.

Notes for the Chapter:

phew! got a bit of writer's block on this one idk why

4. Chapter 3

"I *told* you that you shouldn't have worked today," Myra said as she opened the door when Eddie returned home. He was still feeling clammy. She pressed one of her palms against his forehead. "Hm," she mused, "no fever."

Gently, Eddie batted her hand away. "It's a headache," he explained. "You were right. I shouldn't have gone in, I was a hazard on the roads, I swerved after I picked Stevens up and I nearly caused an accident."

"*Eddie* ," she breathed in horror, "you poor thing."

Wasn't that the reaction that Eddie wanted? Not Tozier's cackling indifference, not Stevens's anger. Just concern. Myra cared about him. "You need to take an aspirin," she said, already propelling him up the stairs, towards his medicine cabinet. "If it gets any worse, we'll go down to the ER later. Go and put yourself to bed, okay? I'll bring you a pill in a second."

"Okay, mommy, I'll go lie down."

She stared at him.

"Myra," he corrected.

He rubbed at his eyes. Eddie wasn't lying about the headache; he could feel it rearing up beneath his skull. There was something wrong with him. He was ill - that explained why he behaved so strangely with Richie, and why he'd been acting so strange the last few weeks, and why his body was still feeling that hot-and-cold discomfort, and why he couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd made eye contact with Richie in the rear-view mirror and the world had seemed to slide into a different sort of tilt to the one it usually held...

Here's the thing. Sometime a few months ago, Eddie's life had changed.

If he really pushed it, he might have been able to pinpoint the exact

day, even the exact moment, although he was doing nothing out of the ordinary; driving Al Pacino, and since Eddie had never actually seen *The Godfather* he didn't pay much attention to his passenger. It was the cusp of summer and the New York heat was beginning to rise up, so the windows were open. The fumes were wafting in off the road.

It was an unremarkable moment. And yet, as though a bad smell was filtering in through the open window alongside the exhaust gases, Eddie started to be overwhelmed by a feeling. It was a feeling of sinking. Of grounding. As though he'd spent the past however many years floating along along the river of life (a term he'd hear on a meditation cassette, when Myra had been on a self-improvement kick) and now he was looking at reality for the first time, feeling the weight of his own body and the world around him, and everything became clear.

Eddie was no longer floating. Sure, he was still being dragged along by the river of life, but now it was more like drowning.

From that moment on, nothing felt quite right. His patience with Myra wore thin even though she was doing nothing but go through the motions they'd always gone through, playing the game they'd always played. Pretend spouses. They were like children in a playground playing moms and dads, saying "I love you" and making dinner and settling, always settling... Eddie drove rich people around New York and tried to remember why he even bothered, why he ever thought this was such a good job. The congestion and the honking and the people (both inside and outside the car) drove him insane, and he didn't especially like his co-workers, and the money was good, yes, but Eddie's life could be just as nice if he lived on a quarter of his current salary. He didn't need the house on Long Island or the Gucci loafers or the suits that cost over a thousand bucks each. He *definitely* didn't need the stress and the headaches and the long hours. Not to mention business was flagging - he still made profit, of course, because it was hard *not* to make profit in a field whose whole model revolved around charging people extortionate prices for things that didn't actually cost a lot. But he was no longer buoyed along by the easy success that Eddie had enjoyed before.

To put it simply: Eddie realised that he was living a lie.

It was a kid's life. The sort of life that people *thought* they should lead. Wife, house, successful career. Theoretical happiness.

Realising that his life was a lie was both monumental and disappointing. It should have been a big deal, but it wasn't. Eddie didn't do anything. He didn't act. Didn't sit up in bed one day and say, *Oh my God! This is all bullshit! I'm going to run away and never look back!* None of the mid-life crises that looked so glamorous when Hollywood movie stars had them and so depressing when ordinary middle-aged businessmen had them. He didn't even buy a motorbike. He just plodded on, day after day, week after week, month after month.

Eddie rolled over on his mattress and screwed his eyes shut when Myra came into the room with a glass of water.

Was she still floating, he wondered? Or had Myra experienced a similar moment to Eddie - did she now realise that their life was a joke, a farce, a game? Did it scare her like it scared Eddie? Or - even more horrifyingly - had she never been floating at all? Had she chosen all of this for herself because this was the best life she could realistically get? Did she love Eddie? Surely even Myra, who was sweet and caring and loved to support people, didn't *really* love Eddie any more than he *really* loved her. But that was a dangerous thing to think. He felt as though his head was full of cotton wool. This, Eddie was sure, was all Richie Tozier's fault, it was all because of those stupid fucking voices he kept doing that didn't even *sound* good, and his stupid glasses (no, for the last time, he wasn't wearing glasses), and the shit-eating grin he wore as he stared at Eddie in the rear-view mirror, yeah, they looked at each other for far too long in the rear-view mirror...

The phone rang.

The sound of it cut through the silence of his room like a knife through butter and Eddie bolted upright, was on his feet and in the hallway just in time to answer the ringing before Myra reached the handset downstairs. No doubt she'd be listening in anyway, but Eddie was used to that. "Eddie Kaspbrak," he said.

"It's Demetrios."

Not a good sign; usually people didn't contact Eddie at home. They were colleagues, but decidedly not friends. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yeah, we got someone stopped by the office," said Demetrios.

"Shit, it's Seb Stevens, right?" Eddie could feel the killer headache boring through his skull. Myra was right. Why hadn't he already taken an aspirin? Why couldn't he have taken one an hour ago, so that it would be effective now? "Tell him I'll refund today. No sense burning bridges. See if you can get him not to drop the company, but _"

"No, it's not Stevens."

Eddie's stomach dropped. "Then who is it?"

"What's your name again?" A pause. Static on the line, the fuzz of ambience. "Right, right, Tozier - yeah, I'm tellin' him *now*, man - says he wants to apologise to you, Eddie."

"I'll be right there."

He clambered down the stairs. Myra gawked, but Eddie was already shrugging his blazer back over his shoulders, sliding his feet into those shiny shoes that always gave him blisters because he had to buy replacements the second they started to wear in. Can't have a scruffy-looking driver, after all. "Eddie? Are you *leaving* again?"

"Looks that way."

"But you just got back -"

"I know," he snapped, "and now I'm going again."

Myra's face fell. Fuck. Why couldn't Eddie just be *normal*, for once in his life? Why couldn't he be a good husband? Why was he always irritated with Myra even though she'd done nothing wrong, why was he always avoiding her and creeping around her and pitying her and resenting her? "I'll be back soon, Marty" he said, as soothingly as possible when his chest felt a little bit like it was on fire, and at Myra's petulant look he leant over and pressed a kiss onto her

forehead. "I've just got to sort this out, we'll take a real hit if Stevens cancels on us now, okay?"

"Don't go, Eddie-bear," she said in that whiny voice that he *hated* , "the next episode of -"

"Goodbye," Eddie said. He walked out of the door.

~*~*~

So he drove back to the office feeling like shit. Richie Tozier was sat at one of the chairs doing that same dance from the car, twitching and fidgeting like he had ants crawling up his pants, and when he saw Eddie he leapt to his feet. "I'm sorry, man," he said, and he sounded sincere enough to make Eddie defrost somewhat. "That was like, totally uncool, when I made Seb blow up at us. He's a dickhead. I didn't mean to get you fired or whatever."

"Whatever," Eddie said, "it's fine." It was fine. They could afford to lose Seb Stevens's business; Eddie wouldn't even notice the loss. He was more concerned about his reputation than anything else, and Richie Tozier *definitely* couldn't help him with that.

"I'll pay you back -"

"Absolutely not."

"Come on. At least let me buy you a drink, or something."

"My wife doesn't like me drinking."

"Well I got good news, Eddie my man, the ol' ball and chain is nowhere to be seen." He did a pantomime of looking around, hopping and peering around the corner, ignoring Eddie's unamused glare. "Yup! No sign of her. Just that devilishly handsome Italian piece of ass you've got working the front desk - oh, unless *he's* the one you're calling your wife -"

"Were you born this annoying?"

"No, Eds, it's all special for you."

"I have a wife. A *real* wife," he interjects when he sees Richie gearing to interrupt. "Besides, Demetrios is Greek, not Italian, so -"

"Oh, you don't like 'em Greek? Tell me, Eddie baby, tell me all about how you like your men, I'm all ears."

This conversation was making Eddie's tongue feel uncomfortable in his mouth. "Fine," he said after slightly too long a pause, "you can buy me *one* drink if you promise to shut up for a second, alright?"

Rather than responding, Richie mimed drawing a zip across his lips. Then he pretended to suffocate, cheeks puffing out uselessly and eyes bulging wide, and Eddie rolled his eyes because it wasn't even an especially good impression of asphyxiation.

Eddie had to choose the bar, because of course he did, Richie had never even been to New York before. Luckily years of driving had given Eddie a very good mental map of bars his customers might want to be dropped off. There were big-name places for big-name people, but for Richie he chose somewhere near Richie's hotel that was barely more than a dive bar, just a few tables and cheap-yet-cheerful booze and music that played slightly too loud. He had never actually been inside the bar (Myra was very discerning about the sorts of places she wanted to go), but he tried not to let his mild disgust at the sticky table show on his face. Was this the sort of thing people actually did? Who goes out for a drink with someone they'd never met before? Who says "*at least let me buy you a drink*" outside of rom-com heartthrobs and sex offenders, and for that matter, who the fuck accepts? Well, Eddie, obviously, but he wasn't the driving force. He scowled at Richie. "Why are we here?" he snapped.

"What? We're getting drinks, dude, were you even listening? You need to go unclog your ears?"

"I know, but who even does that?"

Richie screwed up his nose. "Everyone drinks. That wife of yours keep you under a rock, or something?"

"Pretty much," Eddie muttered, and then instantly felt guilty. He was his own man. If he blamed his miserable life on Myra, who was

pretty much his only ally, he might actually go insane.

"Right." Richie fidgeted. "Uh, what'cha want, then?"

"Just get me a beer."

Richie went up the bar and came back with two glasses of off-putting pale beer. Maybe it was all in Eddie's head, but he could have sworn they *smelled* stale. He accepted the glass, and they both sat in silence for a second as Eddie took a sip and tried not to wince at the disgusting flavour. He had always hated beer. The hops caught in his throat.

Richie sighed. Clearly, he was not comfortable being quiet for even a moment. "Ugh, man, you've got a serious talent for being a downer. This has all the discomfort of a first date and none of the perks, if ya get what I'm saying." He made a lumpy gesture over his chest, just in case Eddie was unsure what he was alluding to. "Throw me a bone, here. Tell me about you. What kinda, uh, what kinda music do you like?"

Eddie replied quickly, because he could see Richie's brain latching onto the phrase '*throw me a bone*' and didn't want to hear what would be next to come out of his mouth. "Barry Manilow," he said. It was the first musician to come to his head. Myra had all his records, liked to listen to them and that meant that Eddie had to listen to them as well, and they weren't bad, if a little bit girly.

"Barry Manilow?" Richie gaped. "*Barry Manilow?*"

"Yes, dickhead, what's wrong with Barry Manilow?"

Rather than explaining, he did one of his awful singing impressions that left Eddie clamping his hands over his ears. "*Now, nooooo, now,*" Richie droned, "*and hold on fast... Could this be the magic... At laaaast?*"

"Oh God, you've ruined him forever."

"Fucking Barry Manilow deserves to be ruined forever, like Jesus Christ, man, I don't think you could've given me a worse answer."

Eddie scoffed. "Yeah, and what's so great about your music taste?"

"I have an excellent music taste! They call me Rich *Records* Tozier for a reason, yes they do, sir!"

"Bullshit. No one calls you that."

"They do!"

Eddie and Richie were both grinning. Eddie's cheeks hurt.

Eddie had never been a big drinker. He shouldn't have been drinking that night at all; he'd told Myra that he would be back home soon, that he was just going to the office, but in the blink of an eye he realised that an hour had passed and at this point he had already gone off the deep end, so fuck it, he could do what he liked. Myra would be equally pissed if he came home now or in three hours' time. By then he was comfortably drunk and Richie was well on the way to absolutely sloshed. Considering the sheer volume of alcohol that Richie had imbued in the time since they arrived, Eddie was surprised that the man's liver was still functioning at all. "It's all about," he was currently rambling from where he leaned his arm a bit to heavy across Eddie's shoulder, now sat on Eddie's side of the booth with his feet kicked up insolently on the table, "it's all about the fucking Voices, man."

"Your impressions are shit," said Eddie bluntly.

"I know! I know, and it's driving me fucking insane! Like, I swear to God, okay," he pushed himself upwards a bit, put a palm over his chest and said in a very solemn Voice, "I swear on like, my mom's grave or whatever -"

"Is your mom dead?"

"Well, no -"

"Mine is, you insensitive asshole!"

"I swear on my mom's grave," Richie repeated louder, "they used to be good."

Eddie snorted.

“It’s true! Fuck you, man, you don’t know me. You think you get to be a big-shot DJ with shitty impressions like a kid who’s just watched SNL for the first time? I live in Beverly Hills, for fuck’s sake, people love me!”

“What changed, then?”

Richie shrugged. Deflated. “Dunno. Want another round of drinks?”

“Sure, sure.”

The party kept going. Once Eddie was properly drunk - not falling down and slurring, not *that* bad, but drunk enough for the world to feel nice and warm and Richie to feel like the best friend he’d ever had - and Richie was *drunk* drunk - also not falling down and slurring, but Eddie had a feeling this was more due to practice than anything else - the two of them stumbled out into the street and moved on to the next bar along, that was much nicer and where Eddie felt more comfortable ordering himself a glass of wine rather than that piss-tasting beer, even though Richie ribbed him for drinking like a woman. Eddie found himself strangely unbothered by Richie’s constant teasing. Coming from anyone else, it’d be deeply offensive, but Richie never seemed malicious so much as attention seeking, which made them a good match, because Eddie wasn’t attention seeking so much as malicious. He felt strangely young when the cold air hit his face (leaving again, hopping along to the next place, then the next) and the only respite from the chill was the heat of Richie Tozier pressed against his side. It felt natural. He liked the fuzz in his brain. Richie said something into his ear and he laughed.

Notes for the Chapter:

swear to god the only time i can write is when i'm
near a uni deadline :")

5. Interlude: Beverly Marsh

It was Kay McCall who saved the day, in the end.

Maybe Bev should've seen that coming, because Kay McCall was all about women's lib and feminism and burning bras and Rights For Everyone and equality and the Stonewall riots and free love and college protests, but in high-end fashion plenty of people liked to *talk* about how progressive they were, and no one liked to so much as donate an old dollar to a homeless guy. Even Kay's most ardent fans had to admit that, by the third book on feminism, a slightly cynical commandeering of progressive ideology for profit was at play.

But Kay pulled through. Clearly she still had more links than Beverly realised. Bev never even had a *trial* . Apparently they gathered enough evidence for self-defence to be the default ruling, and she was let go without so much as a slap on the wrist.

It started like this: Beverly Rogan woke up one morning, and she didn't want her husband to hit her any more.

(Not that she *ever* wanted Tom to hit her, not really. She'd been going over this a lot with her therapists. Beverly was rich enough to have two therapists. One was an elderly woman, and one was a young man, and Beverly liked the dichotomy there, liked the idea of getting opposite perspectives on her issues and combining them to find something like the truth.)

So maybe she never wanted Tom to hit her, maybe she was never complicit in her own abuse, but this was undeniable: Beverly *Marsh* woke up one morning and something had changed inside her brain. It was like having her eyes open for the first time. It was like surfacing after being underwater for so long that she was beginning to drown. She turned and saw his ugly face and thought, *no* . She took out a cigarette. She let him wake up to the smell of her smoking.

Why hadn't this moment come sooner? Years sooner?

The mind works in mysterious ways, her therapists told her. Their perspectives were usually not opposite so much as depressingly

similar.

Her therapists told her it happened like this: Usually, when Tom was abusing her, she dissociated. She left her own body. It was a trauma response, it had been ingrained into her from a shitty childhood, it wasn't her fault. For some reason, that day, Beverly instead experienced a fight-or-flight response at the sight of her husband coming after her with a belt. Specifically, a fight response. The rest was history.

Beverly's memories told her it happened like this: She never knew she could be so strong until the moment she brought the solid steel and glass clock down onto Tom Rogan's head and split his skull into two halves with such a resounding force that she could *hear* the bone snapping. For years, Beverly's body had been nothing but an inconvenience for her to drag around. It was too large to fit in her designer clothes (this was the 80s, after all, darling, and even someone as skinny as Bev wasn't skinny enough for the clothes she designed, not really, only anorexia patients and famine victims would fit in them *just* right) and it was too dependant on booze and cigarettes and adrenaline, it was too sexual to escape Tom's notice on nights she'd rather sleep. Beverly had forgotten that her body was meant to serve *her*. She was remembering it now, as she brought the clock down, animalistic in her rage, biceps burning with the weight and fear and high. Blood dribbled into her eyes where Tom had smashed a decanter over her forehead and failed to knock her out. Whip marks burnt on her skin. There was also glass stuck in her foot, although she wouldn't realise until later, when she hobbled over to the phone and called the police.

Bev was lucky; she was self-aware enough to know that much. Tom Rogan had been larger and stronger than her. His only weakness had been his underestimation of Bev's own strength - but that proved weakness enough, in the end.

Bev was also lucky because she was rich and famous, she had friends in high places and one particular friend with a web of feminist lawyers, and she was skinny and pretty and white and looked at the police officers with big, watery eyes, and they missed the dangerous animal and saw her as a victim.

You were the victim, her therapists told her, you weren't the bad guy here, Beverly, you were defending yourself.

The therapists were Kay's idea. Lots of things were Kay's ideas. She had been the first to respond to Beverly's call from the police station, and she had held Beverly while she shuddered and dry-heaved, and she had insisted that Beverly needed to come and live with her afterwards, batting away protests with the same no-nonsense attitude she used for everything in life. No wonder Tom had hated her so much. Kay knew how to get things done. "It's all done wonders for my reputation," Kay would joke, "they think I'm a proper feminist again, rather than a liberal, bougeoise trend-hopper." To an outsider, maybe that would sound cynical, but Kay also refused to let Beverly out of her sight for sleepless night after sleepless night. Kay kicked her boyfriends (yes, two of them had been living in the house with her) to the curb without a second thought, and never accepted Beverly's apologies for ruining her private life. "I'd rather have you," Kay told her. Kay cooked her omelettes and sausages for breakfasts, and took them to Beverly on a tray if she didn't feel like getting out of bed.

"You'd make a great husband," Beverly told her, and Kay just winked.

Kay threw parties where everyone did so much coke they felt like their hearts would explode. Kay slept with people, a *lot* of people, more than Beverly had realised before they started living together and more... varied, too. The first time she ran into a woman (short haired, tattooed, and easily a decade older than Kay) in the kitchen, early in the morning while Kay was still in bed, Bev's jaw had almost dropped to the floor, and she had awkwardly and quickly excused herself. When Beverly asked her about it, Kay just laughed. "For all your husband went on about me being a dyke, I assumed you knew, Bev."

Things weren't too bad. Beverly thought she might start working again.

The feeling of wrongness, that *no*, still hung over her. It had started that fateful morning, but Tom's death had not muted it. Not forever. She knew there was something missing. She knew, in time, she would

find it.

Notes for the Chapter:

oh shit, i've been exposed, this whole thing was secretly an excuse to push my bev/kay agenda

6. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

warning in case it grosses you out for like. excessive descriptions of vomiting. im sorry.

It was late. The world was spinning. Eddie felt very short because Richie could easily lean against him, elbow digging into Eddie's shoulder. It felt right to have him there.

Richie was trying to find his hotel.

Eddie was giggling.

"We're on the same block," Eddie kept insisting, "I took us to the bar, the *bar* , alright, it was on the same block -"

"And then we *moved* ," Richie moaned back, "we fucking moved, Eds!"

"It's just round the corner."

"We're not on the same block! We're half way across New York!"

In the end they had to get a cab, and Eddie found that so funny he almost wet himself, bent over laughing at the side of the pavement because he was a driver and he was paying someone else to drive him. Richie shouted that he needed to pull himself together, and it wasn't fucking funny at all. Richie also had tears of laughter streaming down his face as he said this, so really, his words needed to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The hotel lobby was plush. The concierge stared at them as they went up the stairs.

Even after he turned the corner, even as he raced Richie up the spiral staircase, giggling and shouting all the way, the look in those eyes haunted him. Judgement. Disgust, maybe? His stomach felt cold.

"Rich," he muttered, "Richie, I think I'm gonna puke."

"It's okay," Richie said, and dragged him over to a potted plant. It was some sort of fig tree. Eddie vomited onto its roots and it tasted like alcohol and the kebab they'd bought before getting in the taxi. A chunk of meat was stuck at the back of his throat. Kebab meat was infamously unhygienic, they had it hung up in that shop where flies could land on it and spread disease. Eddie was probably dying of something. Food poisoning. No, wait, food poisoning took over 24 hours to set in. Maybe this was just the worst food poisoning a man had ever experienced. "You don't have food poisoning," Richie said, "you're barfing 'cause you drank too much, fucking idiot."

"You're an idiot," he replied, and his voice sounded weak. "Besides, you barfed earlier, so don't start giving me shit. Oh fuck, Richie, I don't feel good."

"I know." Richie rubbed his back in what was probably supposed to be a soothing way.

"I have a wife."

Richie laughed. "I know."

"What are you laughing at, you fucking asshole?"

"You, Eds, you're so fucking cute."

"I'm cute while I'm puking my guts out in a potted plant? You're insane. I am actually speaking to an insane man right now." Eddie put his head down in defeat. The leaves of the fig tree tickled his ears.

"You just dipped your hair into a puddle of your own sick," Richie informed him helpfully.

"Richie, I don't want to be married."

"Neither do I. So I didn't *get* married." He waggled his ring-free left hand in Eddie's face. Eddie batted him away with a scowl.

"What do you think of Myra?"

"Who?"

“My wife is called Myra.”

“That’s nice.”

With a herculean effort, Eddie managed to drag his head out of the plant pot and lever himself off the floor. He felt tearful. “My life is fucking ruined,” he said, voice wobbling, “I don’t even fucking know why I did it, Richie. I don’t know why I’m like this.”

Richie stroked his fingers through Eddie’s hair, even though there was some congealing sick in it, which Eddie thought was a very nice gesture.

“I love you,” Eddie wailed.

Richie stood up. He was impressively sound on his feet, and only fell over a few times. “My room’s just down here.”

By the time they went through the door, Eddie’s maudlin mood had lifted, but he was feeling very hungry, and he ignored Richie’s incredibly loud and over dramatic ‘house tour’ to go and raid the mini-fridge. He found half of it already eaten. Richie joined him and they sat on the floor, legs tangled.

“Do you really wish I had tits?” Eddie asked.

“Jesus, I don’t know.” Richie gave it a surprisingly long thought. “I guess that would spice things up.”

“I don’t think I’d like that,” said Eddie.

“Yeah, most guys probably wouldn’t.”

“What about you?”

Once again, Richie gave the question an unwarranted amount of attention. “No,” he said in the end, “one of my exes had giant tits, and they weighed her down so much she wore this weird corset thing sometimes to stop her back aching. Also, it would be kinda difficult to explain. I feel like people would stare at me in the street. I think at most I’d try it out for a day or two, just to see how it felt.”

“Did you know you’re actually more sensible when you’re drunk?” Eddie asked. “Like, if I’d asked you that sober, you’d have made a big deal about stretching it out into some unbearable joke.”

“Oh, I can stretch you out into something unbearable.”

“Ha ha, so funny. Is your sense of humour like the Voices, Richie? Been MIA for a while?”

“Yowza.” Richie took a big bite of one of the complementary chocolate bars the hotel left in those stupid mini-fridges to try and convince people that they hadn’t been conned out of a ridiculous amount of money. “Eds gets off a good one. You’ve got no heart, baby, no fucking heart. All you do is hurt me.”

“You’ll live,” said Eddie.

“I got a vasectomy.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah man, means I can go bareback, and it fucking rocks. It’s the best fucking thing.”

“Just to clarify,” Eddie said, “not only am I lacking in the chest department, I also don’t have a fucking uterus. I could not give less of a shit whether or not you got a vasectomy.”

Richie scowled. “Shit. Forgot about that.”

“Is that seriously your line? Is that how you come onto people? You tell them that you got a fucking vasectomy? I can’t stand this, Richard Tozier, I really can’t fucking stand this, that’s the *worst* thing I’ve heard in my entire life.”

“Who says I was coming onto you anyway?”

“Yeah. You’re right. I’m so unfuckable I’ve not even done it with my wife in months.”

“*Done it,*” Richie snorted, “what are we, twelve?”

Eddie shuddered.

“You had glasses,” he said, “you’d look better with the glasses on, Richie, they suited your face, even though they also kinda made you look like a weird four-eyed bug. You know, it was cute.”

“When did I tell you I had glasses?”

“Come on,” Eddie whined, “do it for me, now. What was I like? I know you saw it too, okay, I saw you in that fucking rear-view mirror, we couldn’t keep our eyes off each other, I knew you were looking at me.”

Richie paused. Sighed. Flopped down on the floor, and his shirt rode up to expose the fleshy line of his belly and a train of dark hair that ran down his skin into his trousers. Eddie turned away guiltily and the room span. Richie sighed again. “You were so fucking pale,” he said in the end, “and when you looked panicked, I expected you to pull out one of those aspirators, but you never did. I thought you should have asthma.”

“I do. Well, not really. It’s a long story.”

“Same with my glasses,” Richie admitted. “I still need ‘em. I’ve got contacts in right now. Not supposed to leave ‘em in overnight but I’m tired and drunk as fuck, so I think they can wait a few hours.”

“Hm.”

“Wait,” said Richie, “there’s something else, too.”

“What is it?”

“You *definitely* used to have more hair.”

Eddie scowled and threw his chocolate wrapper at Richie’s face. The thin plastic wafted in the still air of the hotel room.

“Don’t worry,” Richie promised him, “you’re still cute.”

~*~*~

Eddie Kaspbrak was not the sort of man who woke up, drunk and hungover in a stranger's hotel room, still wearing his suit from the night before, sprawled on the floor with vomit in his hair and a half-eaten Twix clutched in his hand.

Eddie Kaspbrak was the sort of man who always went to bed at a sensible hour (unless he was driving someone who didn't) and *never* got vomit in his hair (unless he was driving someone who vomited, which happened surprisingly frequently; not everyone's stomach was made for NYC-style street maneuvers) and he didn't eat Twix bars (sugar, as Myra often reminded him, was a death sentence for your teeth) but most of all, from the bottom of his heart, Eddie Kaspbrak was a man with a *wife*, and that meant something, damn it. It meant that he didn't go home with strange men. Not even men with charming smiles and slightly wonky teeth and booming voices and kind eyes. Not even Richie Tozier.

He found Richie still asleep in the bedroom. "Wake up," he demanded.

Richie's eyes snapped open with a start.

Eddie crossed his arms. "I need a shower. I need a fucking glass of water, no, an *ocean* of water because the back of my mouth feels like the Sahara desert, and I need you to tell me exactly what happened last night."

"Mostly you cried about your wife," Richie muttered, his head still half-buried in his duvet, "an' then you passed out on the kitchen floor."

"Hm."

"Don't give me that look, man."

Eddie scowled. "I'm not giving you a *look*."

"Do you know what you look like? This is what your face is doing right now." Richie screwed his features up into a comically angry frown, pinching his eyebrows and curling his lips. "That's what you *always* look like, Eds."

“Don’t call me Eds, that’s so -”

“Oh my God, I can’t deal with this,” Richie said, and turned around to face the wall in a melodramatic swing of sheets and limbs. “Shower’s through there. If you don’t want to use the shitty hotel stuff, my bag’s in the wardrobe, just take my shampoo.”

Eddie investigated the bag, which contained both a passport and a sizeable wad of money, and which Richie definitely shouldn’t have been letting strangers sort through. He found a bottle of 2-in-1, which he supposed was better than nothing, and stomped his way into the shower.

As he stood under the weak fizzles of water, Eddie very deliberately prevented himself from freaking out by breathing in incredibly specific patterns that he had learnt through trial and error. He could almost always ward off a panic attack nowadays. He was like a store of nervous energy; he could choose to let it build up, and then a few minutes later, once the danger had passed, *then* he could release. Take a puff of that trusty old aspirator. When he looked down at his legs, he saw a few bruises blossoming on his skin that hadn’t been there the day before. How would he explain that to Myra? How would he explain any of this to Myra when he couldn’t even explain it to himself? Best not to think of that, now.

There was no towel. Because of course there wasn’t.

“Richie!” He banged on the bathroom door. “Richard Tozier, you there?”

Shuffling. A distant moan. “Yeah,” Richie’s muffled voice replied.

“I need a towel.”

“Ah, shit, they’re still on the bed. Yeah, one second.” Footsteps. Then, cautiously, the door opened a slither. Eddie met Richie’s eye through the crack. They both stared at each other. “Got a towel,” Richie said uselessly. Eddie could just see the movement of his lips.

“Uh,” Eddie nodded. “Yeah, we’re gonna have to, uh, open the door a bit more, so you can pass that through.”

"I'll close my eyes, you blushing virgin, don't worry."

"Good. Perv."

Richie closed his eyes. Eddie reached out to grab the towel, and beneath his wet fingers, the skin of Richie's arm felt unbearably hot, and he remembered how nice it was the night before when he had been walking through the winter streets and Richie had been his own personal furnace.

"Thanks," said Eddie, and slammed the door shut.

He couldn't make himself look presentable in the clothes he'd worn the night before, so he had to begrudgingly borrow Richie's, which mostly consisted of the most God-awful ugly T-shirt designs Eddie had ever witnessed. By now it was noon. He was missing work. He had not called Myra to tell her where he was. "I have to go home," he announced, finally stepping back into the bedroom.

"Yeah," said Richie. He was still in bed, but at least he was sat up now. Eddie glared at him. Both of them pretended that the bright white sunlight wasn't killing their eyes. "Your wife will be so fucking pissed. You'll be grounded for like, a month. Wait, not grounded. Wives don't ground you. They just say passive aggressive stuff and make you sleep on the couch, right?"

"How'd you know that? You don't know my wife, Tozier, maybe she won't care I've been out."

"I know how she'll react because she's just like your fucking mom, Eddie, and -"

"You don't know my fucking mom either, you asshole, what the fuck -"

"I do know! What about *my* parents, Eddie, come on, you're the one who started this! Or don't you want to do it any more? You were the one who started it, with the fucking glasses, why did you have to mention the fucking glasses?"

"Dentist," Eddie breathed.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Went was a fun guy. He liked the Voices, or at least he didn’t hate them, which is more than can be said for me, dude. Maggie was Catholic.”

“Sonia Kaspbrak,” Richie answered in the same, chilled tone of voice. “Great big lady. Neurotic as fuck. Came in and told the gym teacher you were too delicate to run. Your dad was dead.”

“Fuck.”

Richie shook his head. “Unless we’ve been mutually stalking each other, something *seriously* freaky is going on right now.”

Eddie wishes with his whole heart that Richie had chosen literally any other time to have this conversation. “I am going to have a panic attack,” he announced. “I am going to have a panic attack. Richie, look what you’ve done, fuck! Couldn’t you have waited five fucking minutes after I stopped freaking out before you dumped a load more shit on me to freak out over?”

“I always dump shit on you! That’s just our dynamic, I can’t let you go and cool off, you’re probably five seconds away from calling whatever bitch of a wife you’ve managed to tether yourself down to.”

“We don’t have a *dynamic*,” Eddie’s voice was a growl, “we met *yesterday*.”

“You knew me since I was in fucking elementary school.”

“Derry,” Eddie says.

“Oh. Shit.”

It was a weight off his shoulders. It was an entirely new, much heavier weight on his shoulders. “Derry,” Eddie said again, “motherfucking Derry.”

Suddenly, the urge to vomit wasn’t just from his hangover. Richie beat him to the punch.

Notes for the Chapter:

boom baby

7. Interlude: Mike Hanlon

Adrian and Don didn't follow up on their promise to let Mike know how they were faring; the calls petered out after a month or two. It was okay. Some foolish part of Mike had thought that, with ripping out the heart of an alien clown and destroying it, he'd managed to break the memory fog that settled over Derry. Apparently not.

Mike was used to waiting. Hell, his life was waiting. Librarians were not known for their impulsive natures, and Mike was more and more of a librarian with every passing day.

Still. He had hoped.

Mike felt as though he was constantly at odds with himself, nowadays; he *lived* in Derry, for Christ's sake, he'd been here his whole life, and his father had been here before him, and he'd dedicated years of his time to researching the town and talking to the folks who lived there. Mike was as Derry as it got. The town was in his veins. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else; he couldn't even imagine trying.

And yet he felt, every day, that Derry was slipping from his grasp.

It didn't start with Adrian. It didn't even start when Mike was 11, not really. For Mike's whole life Derry had been both a home and an alien space; it was simply more evident now, as every day the memories of why he had stayed in the town seemed to fade further and further, like threads coming unravelled, like a life falling apart before Mike's eyes...

In a way he loved Derry. It was impossible not to. If you lived somewhere for your whole life, it got into your bones whether you liked it or not. He felt like a woman in a cheesy Hollywood film: *I hate you, but I love you so much!* except instead of a dashing handsome actor, he hated and loved a town, a frail collection of houses and streets and people. Mike hated the bigotry; he hated the daily racism he faced, the casual way the locals would shun anything they considered foreign or strange or unnatural. He hated the vicious homophobia and the smaller, subtler forms that evil took as well.

Mike hated the way that the very air of Derry seemed toxic and hateful. And yet it was familiar, and Mike loved Derry just as fiercely, because at the end of the day for bigotry to survive it needed a target, and those targets were just as much a part of the tapestry of Derry. Their struggles and their triumphs were woven into the lineage of the town. Yes, the Black Spot had burnt down - but Mike's father had also run a farm, poured his life and blood into the land. The patrons at the Falcon were openly scorned, but they had carved out their own corner of Derry nonetheless. Hell, even the Losers, persecuted by 12-year-old bullies, had managed to build something of themselves into the Barrens. Derry wasn't black and white. It wasn't simple.

If Mike genuinely believed that It was done, perhaps he'd leave. He always thought that would be the end of his journey. Call Bill, Eddie and Richie, Ben and Bev and Stan; tell them that it was time; gather them all down in the sewers. It never occurred to him that someone new would enter the equation.

Adrian Mellon was someone new. Don Hagarty too, of course, although Don was a Derry local and so inherently jaded. Adrian provided fresh blood. He gave that outsider optimism - no real Derry local would actually *believe* that It could be beaten, and maybe that was where Mike's own plan was flawed, because the Losers, at the end of the day, were from Derry. Adrian was all Portland enthusiasm and gusto. He believed in the inherent good in people, he believed in his relationship, he believed in his book, his career, his life and his goals. He *believed* he could kill the clown. That's what made the difference.

Mike wondered, sometimes, what would have happened if he had called the list of phone numbers he kept. Would they have failed? Died? The thought weighed heavy on him, even though it was all hypothetical. Would they have killed It? Could they ever have survived?

He had a feeling that the answer was "no". Maybe some of them would've survived. Some would have died. A human life was a heavy burden to carry, even a hypothetical one.

But wasn't all of that over? It was dead. Mike knew that much, even if the details eluded him; after so many years, It was well and truly

dead.

Or was It?

Because sometimes, Mike had a sinking feeling. Sometimes he wondered. Adrian was great, and he was enthusiastic and cunning and clever and wily - but he wasn't from Derry.

The clown was from Derry.

Could an outsider kill It?

Mike waited (he was good at waiting). He bided his time. After all, he had plenty of time.

He waited for It.

He waited for them.

He waited.

8. Chapter 5

They agreed on one thing, at least: Eddie and Richie must not leave each others' sight.

Their memories and understanding of Derry had an odd, ethereal quality, the sort of feeling that made you wonder if you'd ever really remembered at all. If they left each other, the whole thing might fade. And so they stayed.

"Didn't you have an interview?" Eddie asked. They were in a cab, because he was still hungover and no doubt his blood alcohol would be too high to legally drive. "Or an audition? Something?"

"Yeah."

"So don't you want to, uh, go to that?"

Richie shrugged. He wasn't doing Voices - in fact, he'd dropped them last night - and the absence was almost palpable. Or maybe he was doing a serious Voice. It was difficult to tell, with Richie. "No point," he admitted, and Eddie had never wished for a crap celebrity impression more than he did in that second. "I really pissed off Seb Stevens."

"What does Seb even *do*?"

"You seriously don't know?"

"I don't like to look up my clients," said Eddie, "it's easier to drive someone anonymous. I'm pretty sure he did tell me, but I forgot"

"He's the SNL showrunner, idiot."

"You wanted to get on SNL?"

"Not really. It was my agent. Like, I know I'm fucked and I've just accepted it, but he's not given up on me yet. Says I've got genuine talent. Talent my ass."

Eddie stared out of the window. New York rolled by.

~*~*~

Myra was crying.

Here's the thing: It would have been easy for Eddie to deal with anger. He rose to anger. He'd never backed down in his life, odd as that might seem from a man who was skinny and small and perpetually ill. *Emotional* manipulation was his weakness, and Myra, even if she didn't mean to manipulate, was definitely emotional.

He told Richie to stay in the car, and then he crept into the house, living in some delusional world where Myra might be asleep and he could slip in unnoticed. Of course she was awake (it was past noon), and of course she was distraught. When she heard him open the door, she came pelting down the stairs. She was wearing one of her nightgowns and she had red eyes and the tears were already brewing along her waterline. "Eddie," she breathed, "oh, Eddie," and she was enveloping him before he could protest. She smelled nice; of body wash and perfume. A clean, floral scent.

"Myra," he breathed back.

They were still in the open front door, and he was conscious of Richie's eyes on his back. "Let's go inside," he muttered, "we need to talk, okay?"

He felt Myra nod. She was still crying. Eddie felt overwhelmed, too. Once they were in the living room, she dabbed at her eyes and let out her breath in a shuddering sigh. "I thought you were dead." Her voice was hoarse, scratchy. "I c-called the police, and they told me to wait a few more hours, even though I *said* you were ill and you shouldn't have been driving and you'd nearly crashed earlier in the day..." Her words trailed off as she let out a small, choked-off sob. "I really - I really thought - oh, Eddie, is that what happened? Did you crash? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he admitted, "I didn't crash."

"Then where were you? Why didn't you come home?"

"I was with someone."

"With *who* ?"

"Richard Tozier." Myra stared at him blankly. Eddie swallowed. "The one, uh, the guy I went to meet at the office?"

"You were with a man," she said.

Eddie and Myra lived in New York, for God's sake; they were hardly sheltered. You saw *them* when you drove through the city. Men holding each others' hands, men who emerged from clubs at four AM blinking and covered in glitter, men whose eyes lingered a bit too long on yours when you passed them on the street... Eddie would admit he was more sensitive to it than most, perhaps, because he knew what people thought of him (small, delicate bordering on feminine, fussy and neat and well-dressed). But it was never mentioned. Taboo was perhaps a strong word, but the topic of homosexuality was deftly skirted around in the Kaspbrak household. Or at least, it always had been. Eddie found himself unable to meet Myra's eyes. He glanced down at the carpet, which was a plush, tasteful tangerine colour that they'd picked out together and that Eddie had always secretly hated. "Yes, I was with a man."

Out of the corner of his eye, Eddie could see Myra bring a hand up to her mouth. "And did you..."

"No." He tried to make the word sound indignant (*No, how dare you! No, what are you trying to suggest?*) but it just came out sounding flat. "No, I didn't do anything."

"Okay. Okay." Myra's voice was wobbly, but it was firm, too. Eddie dared look up. A few tears were still dribbling down her face, and he noticed that the skin along her cheeks had been rubbed raw. Christ, she'd probably been up crying all night. Guilt clenched over Eddie's insides like a fist, because he could have called home and warned Myra that he was going out. Hell, he could've said to Demetrios, the second he agreed to a drink with Tozier, *do me a favour and tell the wife I'll be back late*. Would that have been so hard?

"I'm sorry," he said.

Myra nodded. Sniffed. Blew her nose on the screwed-up piece of

tissue still clenched in her hand. "It's okay, Eddie."

"I shouldn't have worried you."

"We can just move on. Everything is over now. You're back here, and you're safe, and that's all I care about."

Eddie grimaced. "Well..."

They were interrupted by the blaring of a car horn from the driveway. Myra startled, and scrubbed uselessly at her eyes. All of the blood drained from her face, except the raw patches she'd rubbed down her cheekbones. "Who's that?"

"Rude fucker," Eddie muttered. "The cab's still waiting outside - listen, Myra, I meant it when I said we need to talk -"

"You brought him *here* ?"

"It's not like that! He's - it's very complicated, but we're not like *that* , and I need to go, Myra, I need to set off right now."

She stared at him, thunderstruck. "Why? Where are you going? Are you out of your mind?" Leaning over, she grasped Eddie's head between her hands, forced him to stare at her, inspected his pupils. He let himself be manhandled. "Are you..." she dropped into a whisper. "Are you *high* , Eddie? Did he give you drugs? I've read about this, I know what people do, they find poor innocent -"

"I'm not *high* ," he snapped.

"Then what's going on? Why are you doing this to me?"

"It's something from my past," he said. God, he didn't want to try and explain. What would be the point? He loved Myra - or at the very least, he liked Myra - but he also *knew* Myra, and there was no way she'd ever accept Eddie's reasoning here, no way she could ever see the sense in dropping his life and running back to Derry, especially not with Richie Tozier in tow. Hell, Eddie couldn't even explain it to himself. Maybe he really was out of his mind. Impulsive behaviour, repressed memories, latent homosexual urges... It sounded like the mental breakdown to end all mental breakdowns. Now all he had to

do was actually start having fits. Could psychosis come on without any warning? He tried to think through everything he knew, but his head was still jumbled, and a bit leaden from his hangover. No, he was fine. He was probably fine.

That's what people always thought, though, wasn't it? That they were fine?

Myra had started to say something again, and her voice was rising up into a panicked shriek, but Eddie ignored her and left the room, stumbled up the stairs to the medicine cupboard in the bathroom and surveyed the bottles before him. No, he didn't need any. He slammed the door shut. Then he opened it again. Then he slammed it shut.

"Eddie, you're really scaring me," said Myra from the doorway.

He sighed. "Do you know what? I'm not having a breakdown and I'm not going mad. I'm choosing to do this. I, Eddie Kaspbrak, am choosing to act like this."

"I can call the doctor, Eddie, or I can take you to the emergency room, it will only take a few minutes -"

"There's no point. Don't you understand? It's finally happening."

"*What's* happening?"

Eddie turned to her. His heart was racing. Myra was scared, but - *but*, always a but - she still looked like she was play-acting. Just like always. They liked fulfilling their roles, didn't they? Now Myra got to be the panicked wife, nobly hanging onto reason as her husband collapsed before her. "Can you honestly tell me," Eddie said slowly, trying to enunciate, trying to make her *understand*, "can you put your hand on your heart and tell me that our marriage is good?"

"Our marriage is good," Myra said.

"And you love me?"

Myra nodded, resolute. "Yes."

"Don't you ever feel like we're stalling? Like we're just going through

the motions? I mean, don't you wish that you had a husband who treated you better?"

"You're good enough for me," she said. "I'm happy with what we have. I don't need more."

"But don't you ever *want* more?"

"Eddie," her voice was scratchy again, rough like it had been when he first came through the door, the threat of all-out crying looming ever closer, "whatever you're trying to make me say, I won't do it. I love you. Just stay here, okay, you're making an awful mistake."

Eddie opened the medicine cabinet for a final time and tried to think of what he would need. Normally he just took the whole cabinet, carefully packing the bottles and pills and cartons into his suitcase if he was away from home for so much as a single night, but today he felt like if he gave in a little bit, he'd end up giving in the full way and letting Myra persuade him to stay. He picked out the most important bottles - painkillers, antihistamines, antiseptic spray, a few plasters - and then pushed past Myra again, let his feet carry him down the stairs and back out, out onto the driveway where the taxi was stalling impatiently. Eddie could hear Myra following, but he ignored her. He flung the door open. "Drive," he said, "just drive, get out of here."

Richie stared at him, eyebrows raised, as the car began to pull out. "Wait - what the fuck, man? I thought you were getting a change of clothes, why are you running out here with," he squinted, "uh, aspirin?"

"My wife," Eddie replied.

"Shit, she chased you out?"

Eddie shook his head. Just as the taxi began to turn onto the road, he glanced back and saw Myra, stood in her nightgown at the open door, watching him. He screwed his eyes shut.

Notes for the Chapter:

What I'm going for with Myra is... I don't exactly

want to write her as an abusive person so much as someone who has fallen into a very toxic role in her life. Idk I really don't like the way Stephen Kings writes women and I'd rather flesh her out and make her seem real, not evil but also not King's weirdly infantilized and insulting caricature of like this needy overweight whiny wife that basically just exists to show how emasculated and downtrodden poor old Eddie is. Does that make sense? Have a feeling that the market for Myra Kaspbrak character exploration consists of literally one person (yours truly) but hey i'm also the one writing so i guess i'll just go for it.

9. Chapter 6

When they arrived at the airport, the first thing Eddie did was insist on buying a new set of clothes, underwear and pyjamas (which Richie found disproportionately amusing), toothpaste and toothbrush so that he could stop stressing about the bacteria he could *feel* coating his gums, and finally, a flashlight. Then he bought a Pollini briefcase to put everything in. Richie trailed behind him with one ear plugged into a Walkman.

"The tickets are gonna be expensive," Eddie was fretting, "we're so last-minute, they'll have hiked the prices through the roof."

"Who cares? We've both got the cash."

"That's not the point. It's the principle, okay? I don't like getting scammed."

The tickets were sixty dollars each, and they had to wait for three hours for the next flight out to Maine. Eddie tried to argue with the beleaguered woman behind the desk, but his heart wasn't in it, and after a while he resigned himself to slouching in the uncomfortable airport seat beside Richie and trying very hard not to think about *anything*. As long as Eddie didn't consider what he was doing, he might have the resolve to actually do it. Best not think of Myra at all. And as for Richie Tozier - fidgeting beside him, those broad fingers tapping the edge of his Walkman, lips slightly pursed - yes, the less he thought of Richie, the better. God, Eddie wished that he had his aspirator. At the very least he wished that he'd packed more from his medicine cupboard.

"You're freaking out," said Richie.

"I am not."

Richie snorted. "Are too."

"What are you, five?" For what felt like the first time in hours, Eddie allowed himself to make eye contact with Richie. What was Richie thinking about all of this, he wondered? Was he as disoriented as

Eddie? Probably not. His memories were still fuzzy, but he knew enough of Richie to recall that he'd been a joker of a kid, all loudmouthed and hyperactive and full of words that seemed to tumble out before his brain could censor him. Adult Richie didn't seem all too different. He probably thought all of this was a laugh.

Eddie's musings were interrupted by the sensation of Richie slinging an arm over his shoulders. It was a manly sort of gesture, and Eddie allowed himself to lean into it. "You *are* freaking," Richie said, "don't think I can't tell, okay? You're only a few minutes away from a neurotic break on a good day."

"Maybe I've changed since we were kids."

"Have you?"

Eddie shrugged into the embrace. He wasn't. sure. Really, Richie should have moved by now; it was getting weird, practically hugging in the middle of a crowded airport, and Eddie allowed himself a few more moments to enjoy it, then wriggled out of the grasp. Richie pouted in mock-offence.

"How much do you actually remember?" asked Eddie.

"Bits and pieces. Dunno, it's all," Richie made a vague gesture with his hands, "y'know? Fucking messed up. How could we just *forget* Derry? How could we forget each other? And the other Losers too, fucking Stan-the-Man and Mikey and Bev Marsh..."

"Bill Denborough," Eddie added, "and Ben, and us two. That makes seven."

"Jesus."

"Do you remember Bill's bike? It had a name, right?"

Richie nodded. Grinned. "Silver. That thing was a giant metal deathtrap. I got thrown off *so* many times. Fucking health and safety hazard." He looked far too fond to just be recounting a bicycle, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening as stared into the distance. Eddie was struck by the sight of him.

"I'm going to change," Eddie said, and stood up. Even though he'd only been sat a few minutes, his back clicked in protest. Great. This was going to be a long three hours.

"Why?"

Eddie pointed down at the green-and-pink monstrosity of the T-shirt he'd taken from Richie's suitcase. It swamped him - and he was pretty sure there were coffee stains on the stomach, too. "Because I'm not wearing this all day."

"Why not? You look cute in my clothes, Eds. Remember when I used to say that to you? Cute, cute, cute."

"I remember," said Eddie, who also remembered how flustered it made him - huh, maybe even back then he was -

Nope. Not going down that road.

"I'll be back in a second. Save our seats, 'cause God knows I don't need to stand up for the next three hours."

" *Yes, sir* ," Richie replied with a disgracefully bad British accent, and swept his arm down into a bow, " *will that be all, sir?* "

Eddie turned so that Richie wouldn't be able to see the smile on his face, and walked away.

~*~*~

When he had a moment of quiet, locked in a dingy cubicle and trying to change his clothes without touching too much of the toilet or the floor or the walls, Eddie could feel the panic rising. He didn't have his aspirator. That was okay, because he didn't have asthma, either, so what good would an aspirator really do?

He had finally done it. Finally done something big and bold and irreversible, like he'd been itching to do for months. Part of him wanted to blame Richie, but Eddie knew it had been inevitable; Richie just provided the final push, tipped everything into critical mass and now it was all boiling over and it was fine. It was completely fine. Everything was fine, in fact, Eddie was fine, he was

fine . He tried to control his breathing. He kept thinking of Myra - what was she doing now? He honestly struggled to imagine it. Myra's whole life seemed to revolve around him, and his job, and worrying about him and waiting for him and...

And what was Eddie, without her? His brain was confused. It was as though two people existed; there was still the old Eddie, friendless, tired, harassed and overworked. The old Eddie had only one friend, and that friend was Myra. She wasn't perfect, but she was sympathetic to a fault, and she saw *something* in Eddie, some worth, some purpose, something attractive enough to marry him and even occasionally fuck him, and wasn't that the best he could ask for?

But there was also the new Eddie, who remembered things that the old Eddie would never dream of. His friends, for a start. Richie Tozier, who was sat waiting for him, right now, probably sat tapping his fingers along to his Walkman. Bill Denborough - God, how Eddie used to idolise that kid - and the others they'd met that summer, the group that he had been a part of. Had he had that capability within himself all along? He'd always thought that he was, to put it bluntly, emotionally stunted from years of living isolated with his mom, and he always struggled to relate to other people, struggled to let his guard down. Had that all been a lie?

The new Eddie remembered other things, too. It was still far too fuzzy to pick out any details, but Eddie knew that something bad had happened. Something to do with disease, maybe, or a homeless bum that had chased after him. Or a clown. Or a fallen-down house. Or the sewer system around Derry? Even trying to think about it started to ignite the remnants of his hangover, so Eddie allowed his mind to skirt around the specifics. One thing was for sure; he had faced something *bad* , something truly awful, and he had come out the other end victorious. If he could do that at 11, couldn't he at least face up to his own mistakes as a 39-year-old man?

He breathed.

To his own surprise, the panic faded almost as quickly as it had set off. Once he felt calmer, Eddie pulled his trousers up and left the restroom. He was going to be okay. He really was.

~*~*~

Three hours crawled past, and then Eddie was up in the air. Him and Richie were too late to get seated together, so Eddie had to sit next to a stranger and try very, very hard not to flinch every time that she coughed. At least his view of the widow was blocked. He always had been a nervous flyer - another little paranoia left over from Sonia Kaspbrak. *Airplanes are dangerous*, her voice rang in his ears, *don't you remember what happened to Buddy Holly? Do you want that to happen to you, Eddie-bear?*

But it was 1985, not 1959, and air travel was much safer now. Eddie's fear was manageable. If he gripped the armrest a bit too tight, it was no one else's business. He wished he was sat with Richie. Then he felt guilty for wishing it. Best not think too much of Richie - he knew where his mind was going to go if he let it linger for a second on Richie, and Eddie didn't have the emotional wavelength for that now. He was clinging together, but he could snap at any moment, and he'd prefer that moment *not* to be on a public flight to Maine. Instead of letting his brain whirr, he pulled a magazine out of the compartment in front of his seat and distracted himself looking through the badly-written articles about other people's holidays.

Two hours later, when they finally touched down, it was only early evening but the sky was already pitch black and the air was freezing. Eddie and Richie gravitated to each other as everyone queued to disembark the plane. Richie chatted his ear off about something or other, and Eddie nodded along, and it was only after they'd gone all the way through baggage claim and into the fluorescent glare of the airport's mall that Eddie remembered he should be alarmed by the ease of their interactions.

Richie didn't notice Eddie's hesitation, which was probably for the best. "I need a drink," he announced, "I hate flying. Fucking unnatural. If we were meant to fly, we'd - oh shit, look, there's a bar right there."

"We don't need a drink, it's only six PM." Eddie tugged at Richie's sleeve, then realised how *close* their hands were and jerked away.

Richie raised an eyebrow.

Eddie avoided his gaze.

"C'mon, Eds, it's gonna be hours before we get to Derry, we'll be driving past midnight if we set off now. Let's wait 'till the morning."

"And stay where?"

"It's an airport, there's gotta be a hotel nearby."

"Are you made of money nowadays, Richie? We've already paid an extortionate amount for the tickets."

Richie gaped at him. "You already - you spent over a hundred bucks on a briefcase! How am I the one who's wasting money? You're stood there in, like, your fucking *designer* suit or whatever you bought because you were too good to wear my T-shirt -"

"It was a Pollini briefcase, and I'm sorry for dressing like an adult, I guess -"

Richie threw his hands up. "Nope. Not doing this. I'm getting a drink, come with me or don't."

Eddie was nervous to drink for the exact same reason that he was nervous to look at Richie for too long. It was the same reason that, back before he fucked up his life, he felt nervous whenever he had a long drive with no passenger, or a wait with nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company; Eddie didn't entirely trust himself to stay in line. He followed Richie to the bar and ordered an overpriced lemonade. The barstools were packed in close, and Eddie had to lean away to prevent his thigh pressing up against Richie's, but apparently he wasn't as subtle as he thought he was, because Richie took a sip of his scotch and said, "you know, you can stop acting like I'm gonna jump you, man." Immediately, Eddie felt his face heat up, and he glanced around, trying to gauge if any of the tired-looking businesspeople were paying attention to him. No one was. For all they were in a public airport, Richie and Eddie may as well have been back in last night's hotel room - they had the anonymity of fading into the background noise, with hundreds of people walking past and not even one of them sparing a glance. Still, Eddie's heart raced.

"I'm not. I'm not acting like that, okay, I'm just - I'm on edge."

"No shit."

"Okay, are you gonna say anything *helpful* , Richie?"

"Probably not." He tipped the rest of his scotch back in one. "I mean it, y'know."

Eddie grimaced. "Do we have to talk about this?"

"I guess not."

"Great. Fantastic. Let's never talk about it again."

"Seriously?"

"Yes." Eddie slouched down on his stool. The lemonade tasted bitter at the back of his throat.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I've just reread this and im so sorry for the incredibly random mix of uk & us english, it's a result of me trying to be Authentic but also never proofreading :)))

10. Interlude: Bill Denbrough

Bill Denbrough thought he understood writer's block.

Writer's block was what he felt back in college when he was racking his brain for ideas in classes he knew he would fail. It was the difficulty of facing a blank piece of paper and trying to write the first word of a first draft of a new novel. It was boredom. It was loops humming and scrunching up paper after paper of *wrong, wrong, wrong* . That was writer's block. All in all, nothing too serious; brute strength could defeat it, and if inspiration really wasn't forthcoming, Bill just went on a walk and came back feeling refreshed. Irritating, maybe, but nothing more.

The Bill experienced a *real* block.

For the first few hours, he paced behind his desk, he stared out the window, he sighed, he took a walk through the idyllic British countryside.

After the first day, he rolled his eyes and complained to Audra. *Never had it this bad* , he said, and she made sympathetic noises and suggested a long hot bath.

Then it lasted another day.

And another.

Then a week.

Bill got short-tempered. He found himself acting out. He no longer found the British countryside idyllic, he found it sickly and grating and boring and lonely. He found his wife unhelpful and she found him and his block annoying. Long walks and hot baths only made him turn his irritation inwards.

Another week. Another.

A month.

Audra agreed that perhaps they needed a break from Europe. They

flew back to America. Would this help, Bill wondered? Was this what he needed - a return to his home country, a return to what he knew? Could he work with this? On the plane journey, he gnawed at the inside of his lip.

Another month.

Bill was starting to feel desperate. He wasn't even angry any more; he felt frightened, and it was a bad feeling, a childish feeling. What if he could never write again? What if his whole life up until this point had been a fluke? He *tried* to force it, but it just didn't work. No characters burst into his mind. No plots wove themselves together for him. Audra tried to help, suggested and suggested, took him to seminars and parties and cooked him dinner, and still nothing helped.

Months passed.

Winter was approaching.

Bill got a strange idea in his head.

"I still don't understand why I can't come with you," Audra said with a frown on the day of Bill's departure. "You always used to say I helped inspire you."

"Well," Bill replied, "that was back when I could actually write."

"I'll miss you."

Audra really was beautiful, Bill thought, admiring the soft gleam of her hair. Sometimes... just sometimes... he wondered if Audra reminded him of someone. "I'll miss you too," he said, and leant over to kiss her, just softly on the lips. "I'll be back before you know it."

"I just hope you shake this block."

"So do I, honey."

And then he was driving; that was his grand idea, his last resort. A road trip. He'd used a circular kind of logic. If a character in one of his books was in this position, Bill reasoned, a road trip would be a

good metaphor to get the character out of their funk. Maybe it would work in real life, too.

Where was he heading? He wasn't sure of the specifics. There was one point in mind, though, a nostalgic sort of reference that he had to fulfill:

Bill was going back to Maine.

11. Chapter 7

They didn't get drunk again - Eddie stuck with Sprite, and Richie just took the edge off his flying nerves. Secretly, Eddie was glad they weren't driving to Derry that night. As urgent as the need to return was, it scared him (this whole situation scared him, the *world* scared him) and the closer he got to his childhood town, the more real it all felt. He knew there was something big on the edges of his memories. Leper, clown, house, sewer. Whatever It was, Eddie wasn't quite ready to face It yet.

Instead they found a hotel. Eddie refused to stay anywhere he felt the hygiene standards might be lacking, so he checked them in somewhere fairly nice, with room service and clean floors and a bellboy whose help Richie refused in favour of lugging his suitcase up four flights of stairs while Eddie tutted and fussed in the background. One room. Two beds, of course. Why wouldn't there be two beds? When two adult men share a hotel room, they book two separate beds. Eddie flopped down onto the one closest to the door. "Mine," he said, "don't make me move again tonight. The other's yours."

Richie sighed. "I love it when you're bossy, Eddie baby."

He wondered what Myra was doing. He debated calling Myra, but in the end, Eddie knew that disturbing her now would just make things worse. He had effectively dumped her after years of marriage and run off with a random man in a taxi cab. Not that Richie was just a 'random man' - but Myra would never understand that, would she? God, how could Eddie do this to her? How could he be so selfish and cruel?

Richie didn't leave him to wallow in guilt for long. He flicked the TV on and Eddie tried to ignore him as he channel-surfed. It worked for a few minutes. Then:

"Oh shit, they've got porn," Richie said, and suddenly the room was filled with tinny sounds of a woman moaning.

To his own chagrin, Eddie felt his ears heat up. "Turn that off."

"Come on, Eds, it's -"

"Turn it off, they probably charge for this shit."

Richie ignored him. "Oh damn, she really -"

"Fucking listen to me and turn it *off* !" Eddie snapped.

Richie turned it off.

In the ensuing silence, Eddie turned to look at Richie, who was propped up on his own bed, and maybe the alcohol had affected him more than Eddie had realised or maybe he was just tired, but Richie looked soft, the harsh jittery edges not eliminated but smoothed down. He was tapping his thigh with one hand. Eddie had the urge to jump into bed with him. Like they were kids sleeping round each other's houses. Or maybe like they were adults sleeping in the same bed for different reasons. Maybe.

Eddie pulled himself up and went through his nightly routine with robotic precision. Teeth, face, no pills because he had under-packed in order to avoid his wife. Brilliant. To compensate, he brushed his teeth again, but *then* he felt anxious because over-brushing your teeth can lead to wearing away the protective enamel. *Eddie-bear, you're a mess*, he thought to himself as he stared into the mirror. His reflection didn't reply.

Eddie got back into bed. Richie went to the bathroom, then came back, turned the light off, and slid into his own bed.

There was a clock on the table between the beds. It ticked.

Eddie shuffled. He felt raw and strange. He felt as though he'd never be able to sleep. The woman's moaning kept repeating in his head.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

What was Richie thinking, he wondered. What was Richie doing?

Why was Richie following him back to Derry? He knew kid-Richie, but adult-Richie was still a mystery. Why had he dropped his SNL audition to fly to Maine with Eddie Kaspbrak? What was his life like back in LA? Did he have a girlfriend? He didn't wear a wedding ring. He had flashed his bare hand at Eddie, last night, drunk in a hotel corridor.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

What did Richie see, when he looked at Eddie? Did he think Eddie was attractive? Eddie was pushing forty, and his hairline was receding, and he was small and annoying and *male*. (Porn on the TV, breathy moaning, definitely female). Of course Richie didn't find him attractive. But what if he did?

Tick.

What would it be like if he was in Richie's bed right now? Richie was warm. He ran hot; Eddie knew that from all the physical contact Richie initiated, the unthinking way he slung his arms over Eddie and patted his hands over Eddie...

Tick.

Tick.

"Richie," he said into the darkness.

Tick.

Shuffling sounds. Richie groaned. "What?"

"Could I..."

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Richie leant up on his elbows. "What? Could you what?"

Rather than explaining himself, Eddie got out of bed and endured the few seconds of winter Maine air (freezing overnight, even indoors, *especially* in mediocre hotels) until he reached Richie's side of the room.

Richie held his cover up. "Be my guest," he said. It was some Voice - the English butler, maybe, but too tinged with sleep to be passable.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Eddie slid in. It was cramped; two adults in a single bed formed an immediately awkward tangle of limbs, and Eddie wriggled a bit and almost fell straight off the edge. Luckily Richie grabbed him and pulled him back, close up against his chest, and oh. Now they were cuddling. Okay. This was fine. Eddie had been right, at least, when he predicted Richie would be warm.

It was unnervingly easy to fall asleep.

~*~*~

The rental car they drove the next morning was below Eddie's standards. Richie didn't care, but he was fussy about the radio and insisted on being "in control" for the journey and personally adjusting the antenna to make sure it was the right length, whatever that meant. He then sang along to everything that played. Eddie, who had insisted on driving, tried very hard not to be charmed by this. They drove for a good few hours before he remembered to feel guilty about Myra, and even when he did, it was muted in comparison to the force of Richie singing along to the '50s rock-'n'-roll station they'd found (apparently he knew every Chuck Berry song by heart) and playing the air guitar as he went. Now and then, his energy even convinced Eddie to sing along for a few lines, which visibly delighted Richie despite the fact Eddie was tuneless and tone-deaf.

It was only as they drew closer to Derry that their good mood started to diminish.

They stopped at a diner, about an hour or so out of town, and Richie ordered a very large amount of food, a burger and fries and a sugar-saturated milkshake and onion rings and ice cream for dessert. Eddie ordered a black coffee and the healthiest thing he could find, which was a chicken and lettuce sandwich. He stared over at Richie, who was staring at him (it was a game they seemed to play a lot, staring and pretending not to stare). "Are you ready for this?" Eddie asked.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure what this is. I can tell *you're* scared, though."

"I'm not scared, I just -"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Richie said in a serious voice. Or maybe he was just being serious. It could be difficult to tell, with Richie.

(Was there a difference, with Richie?)

"I appreciate it," Eddie replied with as much sarcasm as possible.

"Good. You'd make a cute little damsel in distress, you know? *Come and save me, Richie!*"

"I'm - I'm sorry, was that supposed to be an impression of me? Is that what you think my voice sounds like?"

Their food arrived and Eddie realised that he was ravenous with anxiety. He finished off his sandwich in about a minute flat, and then Richie pretended to be annoyed when Eddie stole half of his fries, and half of the onion rings too. It was a dance they'd danced before (a lifetime before, as kids to whom the value of a milkshake was a good few hours' labour) and there was something reassuring about the familiarity of it.

Then they finished their food, and the anxiety *really* set in.

"Just so you know," Eddie told Richie as they walked back to the rental, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets and his face turned away

from the fierce bite of the wind, "I would be one hundred percent okay with turning right back around and driving to New York."

"Nah, I hate New York. It's like LA but the weather's shit."

"Well, we can't drive all the way to LA."

Richie shrugged. "Theoretically, there's nothing stopping us. We could drive all the way to LA. Forget Derry. I mean, who really needs us to go to Derry?"

"We couldn't drive to LA, we need to return the car."

"You're adorable, Eds."

"Don't call me *Eds* ," said Eddie, because every time he heard the nickname it stirred something inside him that should definitely be going un-stirred.

As they stood in the parking lot, a nice car pulled up beside them; a black BMW E28 that was clearly well looked-after, with tinted windows. For some reason, they both turned to watch it. Eddie's heart rate picked up.

It slid into the space beside their own, much more shabby, rental car. The driver's side door opened. A good-looking woman stepped out. She was tall and skinny and had bright red hair, and when he looked at her Eddie felt a little bit like he was going to throw up. Richie made a strange, aborted movement, then seemed to jerk himself back. "Bev Marsh? No way is that Beverly fucking Marsh."

"Richie Tozier," she said, disbelieving, "and Eddie. I thought I recognised you from the road, but I wasn't sure. Richie and Eddie. What are you doing here?"

Richie laughed, although he sounded a little bit wobbly. "We were here first, Bev. What are *you* doing here? Driving up outta nowhere like a fucking woman of mystery - what's with that?" Then they were walking up to each other and hugging. They'd always been close, Eddie remembered - Richie thought Bev was great, *like a guy but pretty!*, and he'd definitely spent an afternoon trying and failing to show Eddie all the yo-yo tricks that Bev had taught him.

Bev held out her arms to Eddie, and they shared a shorter and slightly more awkward embrace. Her perfume smelled expensive. "Come inside with me," she said, and wow, Eddie noticed how white her teeth were, bright against the crimson of her lipstick. It was strange to overlay the image of a scruffy 11-year-old girl with the woman in front of him. "I haven't eaten all morning. We need to catch up. I really can't believe it's you two!"

So they re-entered the diner, and Eddie and Richie squeezed into one side of a booth, while Bev took the other side and ordered a milkshake and a plate of nachos for them all to share, and Eddie ordered another coffee, and Richie ordered more fries. They were pressed very close and Eddie forced himself to remember it was normal for people to touch. People did that all the time. Never mind that for the last decade or so, his only really physical contact had been with his wife. He was sat tight against Richie in a shitty booth in a diner and it was *fine*.

"So," Bev said, "I see you two stuck together."

Eddie shook his head. "We happened to run into each other a few days ago. Pure coincidence."

"Weird."

"No shit it's weird," said Richie, "this whole situation is messing with my head. What are the chances of all three of us coming here at the exact same time after being gone for three decades? I mean, what the hell?"

Bev frowned. She pulled out a cigarette, and lit it with a nice metal lighter, letting the smoke drift lazily up to the ceiling. "The chances are low," she said after taking a drag, "very low. I didn't expect to see anyone I recognised. In fact, no offence, but I think I'd forgotten you two altogether..." She drifted off for a second, took another drag, and then blew the smoke out of her nostrils. Eddie tried desperately not to think of lung cancer. "So what, you two ran into each other and immediately began a road trip to Derry?"

"Pretty much. Oh, and Eddie left his wife."

Eddie scowled at Richie. "Excuse me? Don't you think I could've told her that myself?"

"It's okay," said Bev, "I also, uh, left my husband." She paused significantly before the word 'left', as though another word could maybe be used to describe what she did to her husband. Eddie decided that he was better off not knowing.

"Good for you!" Richie said. "Good for everyone! Look at us, contributing to rising divorce rates and the death of good old-fashioned society."

"I am not divorced," said Eddie.

"Technically," said Bev, "I'm not either."

"Details, details. Could you both just let me enjoy the - oh," Richie interrupted himself, "here's our food! God, I'm so fucking hungry today."

So was Eddie. It was probably the anxiety. "I'll warn you now, I'm gonna steal your fries again."

"Don't you fucking dare, there are literally nachos for sharing, leave my fries alone," Richie said, and when Eddie reached over, he dug his elbow *hard* into the side of Eddie's ribs.

Eddie grabbed a handful of fries, just to be contrary. He glared at Richie. "Fucking owch, asshole!"

"Wow," said Bev, "you two sure haven't changed."

"Neither have you," Richie told her, and batted his eyelashes, "you haven't aged a *day*, babe."

"So I look like a prepubescent girl?"

Richie stuck his tongue out. Bev laughed. Eddie was surprised to find that he didn't feel like an outsider. This was okay, he reminded himself. These people were okay. Maybe it was a lifetime ago, but these people really had been his friends.

Cautiously, and slowly enough that it would be imperceptible to an outsider, Eddie allowed himself to relax against Richie's side.

12. Chapter 8

They agreed to meet at the Derry Townhouse.

Beverly left first.

Eddie and Richie both got into their car but didn't set off. Eddie was sat behind the steering wheel. He felt light, after meeting Bev. Lighter than he'd been in a long time. Maybe he felt brave. Maybe he could face It, whatever It was.

Eddie felt brave.

"Richie," he said, "there's been something I've been wanting to try."

"Okay," said Richie.

"You'll stop me, right? You'll stop me if you want to?"

"Sure, Eds."

Richie stared at him.

Oh dear. The courage was rapidly failing. Why hadn't Eddie bought his aspirator? For God's sake, why did he think he could just say that? Eddie was delicate. He was ill. He was small and slender and sickly and he couldn't just *do* things like other people could and Richie looked so solid

"Just..." Eddie felt a bit as though he might throw up. God. Shit. Fuck. No, this was fine. "Could you, uh, could you take the lead?"

Richie probably knew what to do, right? Richie was so confident. Richie had probably done this before. From the bottom of his heart, Eddie hoped that Richie had done this before, or else they were both screwed.

By now Richie had lost that confident edge, but he still leaned in.

(Richie was good like that. He'd do almost anything Eddie asked of him, anything Eddie *genuinely* asked of him.)

They were kissing.

They were actually kissing.

Richie's lips were just as nice and warm and *nice* as he'd expected. In fact, it was exactly what Eddie had expected. It was too easy. Too good. Where was the anxiety he usually felt when he touched someone? Where was the disgust, the self-hate, the overthinking? They were still kissing, but Eddie started to feel cold. He kept thinking of Myra. He couldn't help it. Richie nipped at his lower lip, and he broke away in alarm, panting, wide-eyed. "Stop a second," he said, and his voice sounded far too loud.

"Okay."

"Just..." Eddie tried to get his breathing under control. Was he turned on? Was he on the brink of a panic attack? He wasn't sure.

"It's okay, Eds, we can just -"

Feeling uneasy, Eddie lunged in again for a second kiss. Ah, there it was. The discomfort he'd been waiting for. Their teeth clicked and their noses bumped awkwardly into each other.

Once again, Eddie pushed Richie away.

Richie ran a hand through his hair. He was looking skewed, his eyes distant, and he was frowning. "Look," he said, "it's not that I'm not into this, but -"

"No, wait," Eddie said, "stop, get away from me."

"Eddie," Richie managed to grit out, "this isn't fair."

No - it wasn't fair, was it? Not on Richie, not on Myra, not even on Eddie. "I do want this," Eddie said. It sounded weak, even to his own ears.

Richie laughed. "Sure."

"This is difficult for me, okay? I left my wife *yesterday* !"

"You think I haven't met guys like this, Eds?" Richie blew out his breath in a long sigh, and relaxed back against the cheap headrest, his eyes closed. Eddie stared at his profile. Was it normal to find another human, a pretty unremarkable middle-aged man, so beautiful? It was like every angle of his face had been mathematically calculated. Eddie wanted to kiss him. That, he supposed, was attraction - not wholly foreign to him, but not usually so drawn-out and tantalisingly possible. It was the sort of emotion he only usually felt towards strangers and movie stars and people he'd never see again. Richie opened his mouth. Lips against slightly crooked teeth. "I've met guys, alright, in these shitty marriages with shitty jobs and like, a mortgage and a dog or whatever, maybe a kid or two, and they wanna escape it all and they see something in me that's quirky and loud, and then we go back to my house, and we fuck our brains out for a few hours, then he goes back to his picket fence or whatever and we never see each other again. There's a whole world of it, a whole fucking closeted America just beneath the surface of the regular one. Try being bisexual in LA, you'll know what I'm talking about."

"And those are the guys like me?"

"I dunno, man. Are they? 'Cause it sure fucking seems like it, you don't even wanna *touch* me half the time, and then you spring all this on me?"

"Well." Eddie said. "Okay. I'm glad you know my type so well."

"No, c'mon, that's not what I meant -"

"I think we better drive," Eddie said.

~*~*~

There was a reason Eddie married Myra. There was a reason he felt the need to bog himself down with medication and limitations and anxiety and stress. Beneath it all, Eddie was more scared of himself than anything else. He was scared of what he would do. He was scared he would do something crazy. Like run away from home and kiss a man in a rental car. Something like that.

~*~"~

Tension had never sat well between them; kid-Eddie could hold grudges against Bill, but never Richie, who was too excitable and apologetic and genuine. Trying to be mad at him was like trying to be mad at a hyperactive little puppy.

It turned out that adult-Richie had mastered the art of sulking. That suited Eddie fine, because he was a champion sulker, his skills honed from years trapped in his bedroom as his mother prowled around the house below, when his only emotional outlet was solitude. He could out-sulk Richie any day. He was going to be the sulking champion. He might also have a panic attack. The panic attack was looking more likely. "We've got to pull over," he said, and then swerved a bit too sharply and ploughed the car into the grass verge. Once he had stopped moving, he felt like he could breathe again.

"Uh," Richie said, "you okay there?"

"No! I'm not fucking okay! We're driving towards It, and I've left my wife, and now even *you're* pissed off at me, and I'm struggling to cope, Richie!" Eddie unstrapped his seatbelt, breathed, and breathed again because the first breath wasn't good enough. "Swap with me," he said, "because honestly, I don't think I can drive any farther towards Derry."

Eddie opened his door and walked round to the passenger's seat. Richie, rather than behaving like a sensible human being, clambered over the gearbox in a mess of ungainly limbs, and somehow managed to topple himself into the driver's seat.

"Just for the record," Richie said as he started the car up again, "I'm not pissed off at you."

"Okay. Great."

They drove.

Eddie had forgotten how the winter landscape looked in Maine. Winter was a different beast up here. Forget New York; in Maine you could see the cold air and its brittle frost, and the trees were thick

and cracked with it, and the sky was a dull, foreboding slate. He watched out the window as they drew closer. There were few cars. Not much traffic into Derry, he supposed.

It wasn't too late to turn around.

"I'm not pissed off," Richie said again. "I just don't know what you're after, man."

Eddie couldn't help but smile, though he tried to bite it back. "That makes two of us," he said in the end, after a bit too long of a pause.

"Why did you - I mean, are you even -"

"Look," Eddie said, and Richie immediately clamped his mouth shut. "I'm sorry for, uh, doing that. It won't happen again. I don't know what I was thinking, to be honest, I'm just under a *lot* of stress right now, and I guess you are too, and the last thing we need is to be arguing amongst ourselves, right? So can we just pretend this never happened?"

Richie nodded. "Sure. Whatever. It never happened. That's fine. It was a mistake, and now we've moved on."

They passed a sign. Derry was five miles away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Short chapter.... Writer's block.... You know the drill

Also thank you to everyone commenting cause you're honestly my only motivation haha ⚙️⚙️

Author's Note:

my tumblr is [xenixat](#) :^)